

Exploring library and information experiences of Arab students studying in the United States

Abstract: This paper is an exploration of past and present experiences Arab students studying in the United States have encountered while accessing information. How these experiences, both in their home countries and in the US, have influenced their perceptions of information and libraries and personal and professional lives are also discussed.

Résumé:

1. Introduction

We live in a global society connected through the Internet. Some of the most basic information regarding an individual's family, health, and education will be found using the Internet. In order for people to gain access to this information they require both the skills needed to search for and retrieve this information as well as the ability to then evaluate this information for accuracy and relevancy. Information literacy skills are becoming increasingly more important in our rapidly changing information environment overflowing with information resources from across the globe.

Given the recent development of political revolutions in North Africa and the Middle East, information literacy skills are even more crucial in order for people to access the most current, reliable information regarding what is going on in their country and surrounding areas. The Arab world has seen great increases in access to the Internet, but most Arab students lack the “basic skills necessary for conducting efficient and effective searching” as do information professionals in the Arab world, particularly when it comes to searching for resources in Arabic (Fahmy and Rifaat 2010). The lack of exposure to electronic resources affect the way online resources are used as well as how effective they are when consulted. Information literacy courses used in the Arab countries are ones originally created for Western society and contain examples that may be deemed culturally inappropriate and thus ineffective in teaching (Martin, Birks, and Hunt 2010).

Although there is a wealth of literature on information literacy only a small fraction is focused on information literacy initiatives in the Arab world. The existing literature acknowledges the existence of a problem with information literacy in the Arab world, but little research has been done in order to pinpoint the specific issues with these courses and what part of the culture itself is in conflict with what is being taught in the classroom. Models of information literacy in the Western world assume that students are starting with a particular foundation in how to find and evaluate information. When taking into consideration the complex social and political history of North Africa and the Middle East, it is hard to believe that there are more than a few small similarities in how our cultures think and have experienced information, sources of information, and information retrieval because of how information is created, organized, distributed, and used differently within our cultures. Despite these cultural differences there has been little research focused on the experiences that have created the foundation of information

literacy skills within the Arab world and how these experiences differ from individuals in Western societies who have been charged with creating the content for these courses.

The goal of this research is to learn more about the individual perceptions and experiences Arab students have had with information and information centers both in their home country and in the United States and how this has changed how they think of and use information. Similarities and differences in how information is experienced and perceived by those from Arab countries may lead to a better understanding of their relationship with information and the technologies used to search for and retrieve information, thus assisting in the development of a more culturally appropriate information literacy model.

2. Research Objectives

The purpose of this study is to better understand how students from Arab countries perceive, find, and access information in order to better understand the culture of the Arab world as well as aid in the development of a more successful, and culturally appropriate model of information literacy to assist people in the Arab world in finding information crucial to their standard of living and studies. Key research questions in this study include: What is information? What is a library?

Qualitative methods are being used because this research is exploratory in nature. The individual experiences individuals have accessing information and the meanings given to those experiences are not something that can be examined or measured by quantity, frequency, or intensity (Denzin and Lincoln 2008). This research is more concerned with the social experiences encountered by Arab students when accessing information and how that affects their perceptions of information and information centers. Restricting this research to quantifiable results would prohibit this research from fully exploring the experiences of individuals in the Arab world.

3. Methodology

Research Paradigm

The research paradigm used in this study is social constructivism. In social constructivism, meanings are subjective to the experiences of individuals. The way individuals construct meanings is a reflection of their social interactions, history, and culture (Creswell 2007). While information may be created and organized by individuals or organizations, these processes are heavily influenced by social conventions, history, and interactions amongst people (Talja, Tuominen, and Savolainen 2004).

Methodological Approach

For this study a phenomenological research design was used in order to better understand the individual experiences of participants through their own words. "Phenomenology is the study of human experience and of the ways things present themselves to us in and through such experience" (Sokolowski 2008, p.2). This research approach was most fitted to this research because the research is exploratory in nature. A phenomenological research design allows participants to describe their perceptions and experiences with information and libraries.

Participants

A total of ten participants took part in this study. All participants are from Arab countries and are currently studying at a public university in the Midwestern United States. The participants range from freshmen in college to doctoral students and are studying a variety of subjects. Students were recruited through the International Center on campus who sent out an e-mail message to students whose demographic information identified them as being from an Arab country. The recruitment e-mail indicated the time commitment and that interviews would be conducted in-person. No incentive was offered for participation other than the opportunity to share their culture with an outsider.

Sources of Data

Sources of data for this project include semi-structured interviews with six international students from Arab countries. Interviews were conducted to collect participant's experiences with information and libraries throughout their lifetime in both their home countries as well as in the United States. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher. The initial interview did not exceed sixty minutes.

Data Analysis

After the interviews were transcribed, the responses of participants were organized by themes found within the response of participants. A list of "significant statements" was developed. Descriptions of the experiences each participant had, using examples from the interviews and the context in which the experience occurred were noted. The final analysis was based on a description of the essential experience of each participant, as well as the "what" and "how" of their experiences with information (Creswell 2007). Connections were also made between past and present experiences and how these impacted the way participants perceived or used information resources.

4. Conclusion

This study was focused on creating a better understanding of the perceptions that students from Arab countries have of information and libraries in order to create a jumping off point for information literacy instruction. This study showed that the students who participated in this study have done an amazing job adapting to such radically different educational standards. They all demonstrated an awareness of the information resources available to them through their university and an appreciation for the library and the wealth of knowledge it holds for both their academic and personal lives.

The experiences that these students have had in their home countries with public and academic libraries as well as book stores laid a foundation for how they relate to information resources and offered a means for comparing the resources that they have access to back home and what they have access to here in the U.S. As this study shows, there are vast differences in how individuals access information, use libraries, interact with information, and how library policies shape the experience of library users in Arab countries.

This study was small and not in any way representative of the entire Middle East, but it does provide a glimpse into potential differences that may exist in the perceptions of information and libraries that incoming international students have. The descriptions that students provided of their experiences with libraries and information may assist libraries in understanding the difficulties and transitions that Middle Eastern students face when introduced into the American educational system which expects a certain level of information literacy in its students, despite the fact that courses teaching these skills to international or domestic students are not always required.

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